

WORD GAMES

Yes, yes, or perhaps not: Francis raises more doubts than the Dubia

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It is simply incredible that the Supreme Pontiff has not yet found the time to respond to the dubia that Cardinals Brandmüller, Burke, Sandoval, Sarah and Zen posed to him, in the "second edition" of 22 July. And that a media operation is in act to convince people

that the Pope really has already responded to their questions comprehensively. Given the gravity of the issues raised and the simplicity of the response required, Pope Francis' reticence - once again, following the dubia of 2016 - reveals more than any declaration could, that he actually has no intention of getting the process, that has spiralled out of control, back on track.

Francis' refusal to respond in a timely manner, instead, dramatically reveals the inconsistency of his and his entourage's reassurances that he wants to leave the doctrine untouched to dedicate himself only to the practice. But, if before, it was difficult to reconcile a deviant practice with a correct doctrine, it is even more difficult now to continue to endorse this slogan. In fact, if this were the case, Francesco would have had no problem answering the cardinals' questions without delay.

Instead, the publication of the letter that the Pope addressed to the cardinals the day after he received the dubia, only demonstrates how necessary it was to reformulate the questions and ask Francis to respond precisely. The usual reply to any dubia addressed to the ministries, based on their competence, includes short answers, usually preceded by negative or affirmative adverbs, which sometimes exhaust the response itself. Francis instead chose the path of imprecise responses to questions fundamental to the life of the Church, thus provoking the obvious and legitimate new request from the cardinals.

It also seems rather disconcerting that the Pope could put in black and white that «even if I don't always consider it wise to answer the questions addressed directly to me (because it would be impossible to answer them all), in this case I believe it is appropriate to do so due to the closeness of the Synod". Evidently Francis doesn't have much regard for the fact that the people writing to him are five cardinals who are asking him vital questions about the Christian faith, and not a group of school kids sending him a postcard from their school trip. His concern was to silence issues before the Synod, but, as it happens sometimes, not everything goes to plan.

Let us now consider the content of the dubia and the Pope's "response" in order. The first question for clarification addressed to the Pontiff puts on the table the rationale on which all the others depend: can the Church change its teaching, to the point it sustains, in the matter of faith and morals, the exact opposite of what is stated in its extraordinary and ordinary Magisterium?

Pope Francis has often cited the passage from the *Commonitorium* of Saint Vincent of Lérins which speaks of the necessary development of doctrine, which

consolidates, develops and refines. The point is that in the text of the *Commonitorium* not all changes are welcome, even less those of paradigm: *permutatio* is in fact synonymous with heresy. The work was written to distinguish the true development of the modification; yet the expression *eodem sensu eademque sententia* of Saint Vincent does not appear equally favoured by Francis.

In his letter, the Pope once again evades the question: it is very well to affirm the maturation of the Church's judgment "in understanding what she herself has affirmed in her Magisterium"; as well as believing that the challenges of our time can stimulate in-depth analysis and lead to a "better expression of some past statements of the Magisterium".

But the point is another, as is more clearly expressed in the second version of the first *dubium*: "is it possible that the Church today teaches doctrines contrary to those that she previously taught in matters of faith and morals?".

Pope Francis' letter introduces a dangerous distinction: «It is important to underline that what cannot change is what has been revealed "for the salvation of all" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 7)». Now, it is simply incredible that the end complement – *ad salutem cunctarum gentium* – is interpreted as a limitation complement. The Pope is saying, against every obvious meaning of the text, that what cannot change is only what has been revealed "for the salvation of all"; and therefore we must "constantly discern between what is essential for salvation and what is secondary or not directly connected to this objective".

This opens a window to those who might argue that, for example, the female diaconate is not something strictly linked to salvation and that therefore, on this point, the Church can also change its teaching. This limiting meaning of the *Dei Verbum* text recalls an old question, when an attempted coup took place during the Council on § 11 of the same dogmatic constitution. At that time, it was about the inspiration and inerrancy of the biblical texts. The adjective "healthy" was inserted in reference to the truth taught "with certainty, faithfully and without error" by the Holy Scriptures, with the aim of restricting inerrancy to only those passages of Scripture that were considered connected to salvation. It was the hand of the Jesuits (always them!) of the Biblical Institute, who wanted to lay the foundations to legitimise imaginative exegeses. The issue was fortunately brought to the attention of Paul VI, who intervened and obtained the elimination of the adjective *salutelis*, and it was replaced by the phrase: "the truth that God, for our salvation, wanted to be delivered in the sacred Scriptures". All the truth delivered to the Scriptures is for our salvation and therefore inspired and free from

error.

Now, Francis invents another limiting interpretation of the text of *Dei Verbum*, forcing the Council say what it does not affirm, in perfect continuity with the hermeneutics of rupture. Because everything "the Church teaches on matters of faith and morals, both by the Pope ex-cathedra, and in the definitions of an ecumenical Council, and in the ordinary universal magisterium (see *Lumen Gentium* 25)" cannot be changed, that is it cannot be expressed except *eodem sensu eademque sententia*.

The point is exactly this and it is not simply the conviction of Saint Vincent of Lérins, since the expression was taken from the dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* of Vatican I and its meaning is contained in the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II. Pope Francis simply has to decide whether he wants to delve deeper into certain teachings of the Church or whether he wants to contradict them; whether he intends to shed more light on some aspects or whether he intends, through these particular aspects, to overturn the teaching of the Church.

What sense does it make, for example, to quote St. Thomas's statement in this context: "the more one goes down to the particular, the more the indeterminacy increases" (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, art. 4)? It is a text that the Pope had already reported in *Amoris Lætitia* § 304, to essentially say that particular cases dodge universal principles and thus open the doors to Communion for divorced and remarried case-by-case individuals. But, what St. Thomas really meant to say, has been already explained in *illo tempore* ([see here](#)). And, it is at the least dishonest not to recall that the teaching of Saint Thomas affirms (and of the Church) the moral absoluteness of negative precepts; because «the negative precepts oblige semper ad semper (always and in every circumstance). In fact, under no circumstances should one steal or commit adultery. The affirmative precepts, on the other hand, oblige semper, but not ad semper, but according to the place and the circumstance" (*Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, c. 13, l. 2).